

【研究論文】

# Ethical Distinctions Between Interpersonal Interactions and Intercultural Interactions as the Basis for Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence

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## Abstract

In an increasingly interconnected, globalized world, institutions of higher education worldwide are revisiting their mission statements to ensure they are meeting their obligations to prepare students for global citizenship, and enhancing their ability to function in diverse, cross-cultural contexts (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). Japan's Ministry of Education has acknowledged this responsibility by promoting universities as centers of internationalization, and by striving to foster mutual understanding and friendship with other countries so as to contribute to global stability and peace (MEXT, n. d.). Because globalization is bringing people together from different cultural backgrounds at an unprecedented rate, the number of intercultural interactions is increasing exponentially. This paper contends that equipping students with intercultural communication competence is an essential component of internationalization strategies, and explores the theoretical and ethical basis for cultivating competence in intercultural interactions as a distinct subset of interpersonal interactions. The paper situates interpersonal and intercultural interactions in the context of the Ethics of Relationship (Weston, 2013), and contrasts interpersonal interactions with intercultural interactions, which require a learned repertoire of skills. The paper concludes that cultivation of intercultural communication competence fits with the Ethics of Relationship (Weston, 2013) as it fosters cross-cultural goodwill and global solidarity.

**Keywords:** ethics, globalization, intercultural communication, internationalization

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is unique in world history. An increasingly interconnected globalized world has led to effortless communication across borders, and an exponential increase in the number of intercultural interactions. Therefore, institutions of higher education worldwide are revisiting their mission statements to reflect their responsibility to prepare students for citizenship in a globalized world, and foster their ability to operate in diverse, cross cultural environments (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology has acknowledged this trend by striving to develop universities as centers of internationalization (MEXT, n. d.). With this in mind, this paper

contends that the ability to engage in intercultural interactions is an essential part of this process, and explores the theoretical and ethical basis for fostering intercultural communication competence as distinct from interpersonal interaction skill. While interpersonal interactions can be expressions of moral behavior towards others in keeping with the Ethics of Relationship (Weston, 2013), this paper posits that intercultural interactions are a distinct, and increasingly important subset of interpersonal interactions that must be cultivated separately. The paper begins by situating interpersonal interactions in the context of the Ethics of Relationship (Weston, 2013). This is followed by an exploration of theories governing interpersonal interactions as well as the importance of humor and technology therein. Next, interpersonal interactions are contrasted with intercultural interactions, and theories governing intercultural interactions are examined. The paper ends by emphasizing the ethical basis for cultivating intercultural communication competence and its increasing value in a globalized world.

Any discussion of human interactions may be enhanced by an understanding of the Ethics of Relationship, one of four families of moral values described by Weston (2013). Relationship ethics are concerned with moral values that govern connections between individuals, between individuals and groups, between individuals and society, and between individuals and the natural world. Weston (2013) points out that we are all social beings, constantly in relationship with and dependent on each other, despite Western culture's proclivity for independence and self-reliance. Therefore, our relationships with others need to be carefully nurtured and cultivated through virtues such as sensitivity, patience, and acceptance (Gilligan, as cited in Weston, 2013). Relationships with others and group membership are particularly valued in Japan which, like the vast majority of cultures, has been characterized by Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) as collectivist. Accordingly, Gilligan's *Ethics of Care* emphasizes the social and interdependent nature of human beings, as well as the need to recognize our moral responsibilities towards others (as cited in Weston, 2013). If the goal of ethics is to attend to things beyond ourselves by "tak[ing] care for the basic needs and legitimate expectations of others" (Weston, 2013, p. 5), then relationship ethics has a key role to play in moral behavior. This paper argues that moral behavior towards others is expressed and realized through interpersonal interactions, of which intercultural interactions are a distinct, but increasingly important subset, as the world becomes more globalized.

## **Interpersonal Interactions**

The Ethics of Relationship (Weston, 2013) imply that we are all essentially social beings with a fundamental need to bond with others. This bonding can be achieved through interpersonal interactions for which we need an interpersonal repertoire of tools (Treger, Sprecher, & Erber, 2013). Several theories exist as to how to successfully engage in interpersonal interactions. Grice (1989), for example, proposes adherence to the Cooperative Principle for interactions that seek to exchange information. According to this principle, interpersonal interactions should be satisfactory in terms of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Quantity refers to providing only as much information as necessary to complete a conversation, while quality means conveying only what is true. Relation means keeping the conversation relevant, and manner refers to how the conversation is conducted and includes politeness and avoidance of vagueness. Grice (1989) acknowledges that the Cooperative Principle is quite narrow and would need to be broadened if applied to other conversational purposes such as influencing or directing others. Furthermore this paper argues that these four categories take on a new significance in intercultural interactions, and this will be discussed below.

### **Interpersonal Interaction Theories**

Theories that offer insights into the nature of interpersonal interactions include similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971, as cited in Jiang, Chua, Kotabe, & Murray, 2011) and social categorization theory (Tajfel, 1981, as cited in Jiang et al., 2011). Similarity-attraction theory posits that interpersonal attraction and liking is enhanced by demographic similarity, such as age, gender, and culture. This is because people with a lot in common tend to share and reinforce each other's beliefs. Social categorization theory refers to the phenomenon wherein people use characteristics such as culture, ethnicity, and religion to categorize themselves into in-groups and out-groups. This, according to Tajfel (1981), sometimes leads to negative or biased perception of out-group members (as cited in Jiang et al., 2011). For this reason, Jiang et al. (2011) speculate that interpersonal interactions between people of similar cultural backgrounds are more likely to lead to trust and bonding than intercultural interactions. Both similarity-attraction theory and social categorization theory raise concerns about how moral behavior towards those who are different or members of out-groups is expressed, and thus have implications for intercultural interactions.

Interpersonal interactions between members of different groups have the potential to be positive, ethical, and free from prejudice if they meet the four criteria of Allport's Intergroup

Contact Theory (Moss, 2008). Interactions that involve equal status of the participants, support from institutions, common goals, and cooperation, help to increase receptivity to diverse age, religion, gender, ethnic, and occupational groups. The benefits of contact with individuals from other groups are more likely to occur among people who adopt a learning orientation and believe that contact with out-group members can be an enriching experience (Moss, 2008). Prejudice against out-group members is also reduced through vicarious or extended contact (Moss, 2008). In other words, people whose friends interact with members of other groups are more likely to be positively disposed towards those groups. This moral enhancement of human bonding is in keeping with Weston's (2013) Ethics of Relationship especially in relation to intercultural interactions.

### **Humor**

Treger et al. (2013) identify humor as an essential tool in people's interpersonal repertoire, which "may positively influence the trajectories of social interaction" (p. 532). The reason, they claim, is that humor leads to perceived reciprocal *liking* and enjoyment of the interaction. They define liking as the desire to continue interacting with a person and the presence of interpersonal warmth and responsiveness. Enjoyment is associated with the fact that people like those who make them laugh. Treger et al. (2013) acknowledge the value of humor as an important tool in social bonding and affiliation, but caution that humor that is aggressive or used at the expense of others can also be detrimental to interpersonal bonding. Humor may also be problematic in intercultural interactions and this merits separate consideration.

### **Technology and Interpersonal Interactions**

The rapid pace of technological advancement has revolutionized the nature of interpersonal interactions. Computer mediated communication (CMC), for example, is now as common as face-to-face communication, leading to a whole new field of enquiry. Some of this research focuses on the danger of deindividuation in CMC, wherein anonymity facilitates, and perhaps encourages antisocial behavior online (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984), which is contrary to the expression of moral behavior towards others. Burgoon et al. (2002) compared perceptions of CMC and face-to-face interactions among American undergraduate students and found that, in general, face-to-face interactions were perceived as easier and more positive. They attribute this to the contextual information, social presence, and nuanced communication that are facilitated by verbal and nonverbal cues in face-to-face interaction; cues which also communicate warmth and interest. However, while these findings are based on intracultural communication (between members of the same cultural group), some researchers have found

different results in comparisons of face-to-face and CMC communication in intercultural situations (Mustafa et al., 2012).

## **The Need to Cultivate Intercultural Communication Competence**

Thus far, this paper has focused on ways to ensure interpersonal interactions are expressions of moral behavior towards others and are in keeping with the Ethics of Relationship (Weston, 2013). However, this paper posits that intercultural interactions are a distinct, and increasingly important subset of interpersonal interactions that must be examined separately. This is because globalization is bringing people from different ethnic backgrounds together at an unprecedented rate leading to an exponential increase in the number of intercultural interactions, both face-to-face and online. Increasing movement of people across national boundaries is resulting in multi-ethnic, multi-layered societies (Jackson, 2011; Lucic, 2013), multi-cultural business environments (Jiang et al., 2011), diverse international organizations, which seek to tackle global problems (Jackson, 2011; Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011), and growing numbers of international students studying at universities worldwide (Kagnici, 2012). In the United States, for instance, two factors are dramatically changing the nature of interpersonal interactions (Lucic, 2013). These are the increasing cultural diversity due to large numbers of immigrants (in 2010, 12.9% of the U.S. population was foreign born) and the expansion of technology-mediated communication.

In an age when national borders are becoming less relevant, research is increasingly looking at the fate of individuals who were born in one cultural context and live in another (Kagnici, 2012). Yagi and Kleinberg (2011), for example, claim that globalization has led to the emergence of a new demographic – biculturals – who have internalized the norms of more than one culture and utilize their dual identities to navigate intercultural interactions. In addition, Kagnici (2012) claims that the adjustment of international students at universities worldwide merits attention and asserts that intercultural communication competence would help them deal with the stresses of culture shock. This would allow them to form the connections needed for social well-being and is in keeping with the Ethics of Relationship (Weston, 2013). Further adding to the proliferation of intercultural interactions is the expansion of the internet and social networking services, which have facilitated greater communication across cultures and this has added a new dimension to the study of intercultural communication (Mustafa et al., 2012).

Japan is not immune to this phenomenon. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, n. d.) believes that attracting international students to Japan

and sending Japanese students overseas will not only enhance intellectual capabilities, but will also contribute to global stability and peace. Furthermore, in an effort to strengthen the international competitiveness of Japanese universities, MEXT implemented the “Global 30” program in 2009, which aims to develop universities around Japan as centers for internationalization by attracting international students and faculty. MEXT hopes to further accelerate internationalization by promoting “Super Global Universities” which will be expected to collaborate with overseas universities, increase the numbers of foreign faculty in Japan, and offer more degree programs in English (Shimomura, 2013). There are currently 138,000 international students in Japan (Shimomura, 2013), and MEXT hopes to increase this to 300,000 by 2020 (MEXT, n. d.). Shimomura (2013) notes, however, that the number of Japanese students going abroad to study has been decreasing, and speculates that this trend can be reversed by cultivating an international perspective and increasing proficiency in English. This paper contends that cultivating intercultural communication competence can both enhance Japanese students’ confidence in their ability to navigate study abroad situations and also contribute to MEXT’s promotion of international universities. As stated previously, based on the Ethics of Relationship (Weston, 2013), intercultural communication competence also empowers people to form the connections needed for social well-being and harmony (Weston, 2013).

### **Intercultural Interactions as a Subset of Interpersonal Interactions**

What then are the main ethical distinctions between interpersonal interactions and intercultural interactions? Perhaps Hofstede et al.’s (2010) mental programming theory can provide insight into this question. Hofstede et al. (2010) distinguish between human nature, which is inherited, universal, and represents what all people have in common, and culture, which is learned from the social environment and distinguishes ethnic groups from each other. It could be argued, therefore, that interpersonal interactions in a general sense derive from human nature and are therefore governed by principles such as the similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, as cited in Jiang et al., 2011) and the social categorization theory (Tajfel, as cited in Jiang et al., 2011). On the other hand, intercultural interactions are based on cultural norms, which are learned, and depend on intercultural communication competence to facilitate social bonding. In addition, while intercultural interactions often involve one or more persons communicating in a second language, it could be argued that linguistic fluency alone is insufficient to ensure successful encounters. This point is probably best exemplified by events following the emergence of the United States as a world power after World War II. According to Rogers, Hart and Miike (2002), despite its military dominance, the U.S. diplomatic

corps was regarded as relatively ineffective largely due to the fact that its diplomats rarely learned the language or culture of the country to which they were assigned. Therefore, the U.S. Foreign Service Institute charged anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, with providing cross-cultural communication training for its diplomatic staff, thereby establishing the field of intercultural communication.

### **Intercultural Interaction Theories**

Increasingly, research is focusing on what happens in intercultural interactions. Crossvergence theory (Jackson, 2011), for example, explains intercultural interaction as an interface of different cultural influences (as is the case in multi-ethnic societies like Hong Kong where Western and Chinese cultures come into contact). Yagi and Kleinberg (2011) caution against conceiving of culture as static and unchanging as this conception leads to the characterization of intercultural interactions as culture clashes. Instead, they posit that intercultural interactions lead people to greater awareness of cultural differences and shared understandings. They term this *negotiated culture*, a more dynamic construct than a static notion of culture. Based on research involving a Japanese subsidiary company in the United States, they highlight the importance of boundary spanners or individuals that successfully maintain interpersonal networks by encouraging collaboration, communication, and trust-building among “geographically dispersed, internally differentiated, and culturally diverse organizations” (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011, p. 630). They stress that the complex nature of intercultural interactions benefits from the skills of biculturals, who successfully switch between two or more cultural schemas and exhibit *cultural metacognition* to monitor their behavior in intercultural interactions.

Other research that describes what happens in intercultural interactions cautions against misunderstanding and miscommunication. Neuliep’s (2003) theoretical framework maintains that whenever we communicate with people from another culture, there is great uncertainty and anxiety because we initially perceive each other as strangers (as cited in Mustafa et al., 2012). There is also a higher likelihood of misinterpretation of verbal and non-verbal cues, but according to Mustafa et al. (2012), this can be mitigated to some degree by CMC. They conducted research which examined the impact of face-to-face and CMC settings on the development of relationships between intracultural (same culture) and intercultural (different culture) partners. Findings indicated that while face-to-face communication was more beneficial for the development of positive relationships between intracultural partners, CMC settings were more beneficial for intercultural partners. Mustafa et al. (2012) suggest that this can be explained by the role played by CMC in *democratizing* communications by eliminating

prejudice and ethnocentrism, which are often exacerbated by visual and social context cues such as physical appearance. Erosion of these barriers, they claim, has great potential to bring people of different cultural backgrounds closer together in cyberspace, and foster social bonding and friendship. Therefore, Mustafa et al. (2012) claim that, in Malaysia, for example, “the greatest threat to the country’s stability has been inter-ethnic disintegration” (p. 42), but that online media, social media, and other forms of interaction offer great potential for inter-ethnic integration. Their findings underscore a key distinction between intercultural and interpersonal interactions as they differ significantly from Burgoon et al.’s (2002) findings. As mentioned above, Burgoon et al. (2002) found that face-to-face interactions were perceived more favorably than CMC in intracultural interactions.

### **Facilitating Positive Intercultural Interactions**

How, then, can we ensure that when we engage in intercultural interactions, as a distinct subset of interpersonal interactions, that we are expressing moral, ethical behavior towards others? One way is to cultivate cultural fluency, defined by Inoue (2007) as “awareness of the ways cultures operate in communication and conflict, and the ability to respond effectively to these differences” (Cultural dimensions, para. 5). Zieghan (2001) states that communication styles and behavior differ considerably along cultural dimensions, and this often leads to misunderstandings, tension and even communication breakdown. Returning to Grice’s (1989) Cooperative Principle, quantity, quality, relation, and manner determine successful interactions, but these mean different things in different cultures. For example, Japanese, Arab and Mediterranean people come from *high context* cultures where there is a long history of shared meanings and understandings, so their interpersonal interactions do not require much detail or background information (Hall & Hall, 1990). In Japan, this also means that indirect, vague communication is preferred (Lewis, 2006). On the other hand, Americans, Swiss, Germans, and Scandinavians come from *low context* cultures where clear direct communication is paramount and background information is essential (Hall & Hall, 1990). Therefore, intercultural interactions between high and low context people may generate misunderstandings because of differing ideas about what constitutes quantity, quality, relevance, and manner.

**Humor.** As stated previously, humor has the potential to enhance social bonding because it involves perceived reciprocal liking and enjoyment of the interaction (Treger et al., 2013). However, this is not necessarily the case in intercultural interactions. Lewis (2006) points out that, “humor crosses national boundaries with difficulty, especially when heading East” (p. 12) because of cultural and religious differences. He cautions that what sounds funny to an American may be puzzling to a German, and that most jokes considered amusing in



Europe and America may not appeal to Asians. This is because the use of sarcasm, satire, exaggeration, and parody as humor techniques runs counter to the Confucian and Buddhist notions of truth, sincerity, kindness, and courtesy. In Asian contexts, jokes about religion, sex, minorities, and black humor would not be appreciated, while humor that is subtle, gentle, indirect, and respectful of the dignity of the listener is well received (Lewis, 2006). According to Lewis (2006), however, one type of humor that could be considered “international” is slapstick as it is equally amusing to Africans, Asians, Americans, and Europeans.

**A learned repertoire of skills.** It can be surmised, therefore, that intercultural interactions, as a distinct subset of interpersonal interactions, require a learned repertoire of skills, in order to foster social bonding and connectedness. In an investigation of the adjustment of international students to university life in Turkey, Kagnici (2012) concluded that well-adjusted students were those who exhibited multicultural personalities, defined by Ramirez (1999) as “a synthesis and amalgamation of resources *learned* [emphasis added] from different people and cultures to create multicultural coping styles, perceptions of the world (world views), and multicultural identities” (p. 175). This, according to Kagnici (2012) requires advance preparation and intercultural communication competence to enable students to successfully adjust to a new cultural environment. Those who successfully navigate intercultural interactions demonstrate *relational flexibility*, as is the case with immigrants with dual-consciousness, allowing them to “function, interact, and make sense of culturally diverse interpersonal interactions and interpret diverse cultural contexts” (Lucic, 2013, p. 435).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper contends that intercultural interactions, as a distinct, and increasingly important subset of interpersonal interactions, must be cultivated in universities worldwide to prepare students for citizenship in a globalized world. The theoretical and ethical basis for fostering intercultural communication competence was presented by situating intercultural and interpersonal interactions in the context of the Ethics of Relationship and the expression of moral behavior towards others (Weston, 2013). Theories governing interpersonal interactions were contrasted with those governing intercultural interactions, and it was pointed out that intercultural interactions are based on learned cultural norms and must be carefully cultivated to enhance bonding and connectedness among people. Because the goal of moral behavior is the enhancement of human flourishing (Harris, 2010), this provides an ethical basis for fostering positive interpersonal and intercultural interactions. In today’s globalized world, as Gudykunst (1986) noted, once people from different cultures achieve friendship, there is

little difference between these friendships and friendships between people of the same cultural groups (as cited in Mustafa et al, 2012). Universities that incorporate internationalization into their mission statements are therefore meeting their ethical obligations to a new, globalized society where global problems increasingly require global solutions. Intercultural communication competence thus has a key role to play in the cultivation of global peace and prosperity.

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